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FILE ONLY

Senior secret agents

OSS veterans exchange memories at anniversary dinner

07 at 70?

One could not easily believe that some of the gray-haired men and women at the Veterans of the Office of Strategic Services dinner Thursday, where the average age of the guests was 65, were once secret agents who blew up Nazi factories or ran messages through Europe's underground resistance movements.

But many of the 750 guests had participated in World War II spy activities, as evidenced by the shared laughter during the showing of a 1940s "training film" that discussed OSS techniques of disguise, sabotage and time bombs, a la James Bond.

Traditions of being tight-lipped persisted. Gunnar Sonstebjerg described his work as the Norwegian OSS leader as "keeping Stockholm informed on a quarterly basis." Later, he was enthusiastically applauded as Norway's "master saboteur" and "the leader of the Oslo gang."

The focus of the evening — both figuratively and literally — was the late Gen. William Donovan. An immense portrait of the man whose intelligence-gathering efforts laid the groundwork for the OSS, the precursor to today's CIA, served as a backdrop.

"He was a one-man intelligence service in the '30s and '40s," said Ronald Reagan, the 17th recipient of the Donovan Award. "He was one of those very rare men who had authority in his face," added dinner co-chairman Owen McGivern.

After its disbandment in 1945, the OSS was kept alive operationally for two years with the help of Lt. Gen. William Quinn, dinner co-chairman, until the CIA was established. This year "marks the 40th year of the dissolution of the OSS," said Veterans of the OSS President Geoffrey Jones. "And we know that life begins at 40!"

"We've got to stop having these things," quipped Countess Aline

Romanones, an OSS veteran of Spain to her sister, Mrs. Kenneth Crosby, "it gives our age away too much."

Clare Boothe Luce, for one, was thrilled that the affair ended early, around 9 p.m. "I like this new tradition," she said. Before the evening was out, however, the former secret agents heard Mr. Reagan praise them as soldiers of "the twilight war — a sacred profession where praise and thanks could only come from history, not from your contemporaries."

They also heard about the prodigal spies, "those who staked their fortune on our doom," such as Briton Kim Philby. "I think as he [Philby] sees the new will, vigor and energy in the West, and especially the renaissance of our intelligence services, he and others like him must realize that it was those who he betrayed who are on the winning side after all," concluded the president.

The president called CIA Director William Casey, a former OSS officer, "the linchpin" in the reconstruction of American intelligence and described him today as "one of the heroes of America in the postwar era."

"He has even his harshest critics singing his praises," added Mr. Reagan, who beamed at Mr. Casey, seated on the dais next to Nancy Reagan.

But power hath its privileges. Mr. Casey, angered by media reports of supposed intelligence secrets, seems determined not to go out of his way to make friendly inroads with the press. When a social reporter introduced herself, Mr. Casey barked, "I don't want to talk to you. This is a social occasion."

Guests included former CIA Director James Schlesinger; Bette Quinn, wife of Gen. Quinn; Arizona Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater; and dinner co-chairman Mrs. James McSherry Wimsatt.

In a letter read at the dinner, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the 1981 Donovan Award recipient, said OSSers "could not have made a finer choice" than Ronald Reagan.

— Cheryl Wetzstein



Countess Aline Romanones,
Mrs. Kenneth Crosby



William Casey, Nancy Reagan



Ronald Reagan, William Quinn



Bette Quinn, Barry Goldwater, Mrs. James McSherry Wimsatt



Clare Boothe Luce, James Schlesinger